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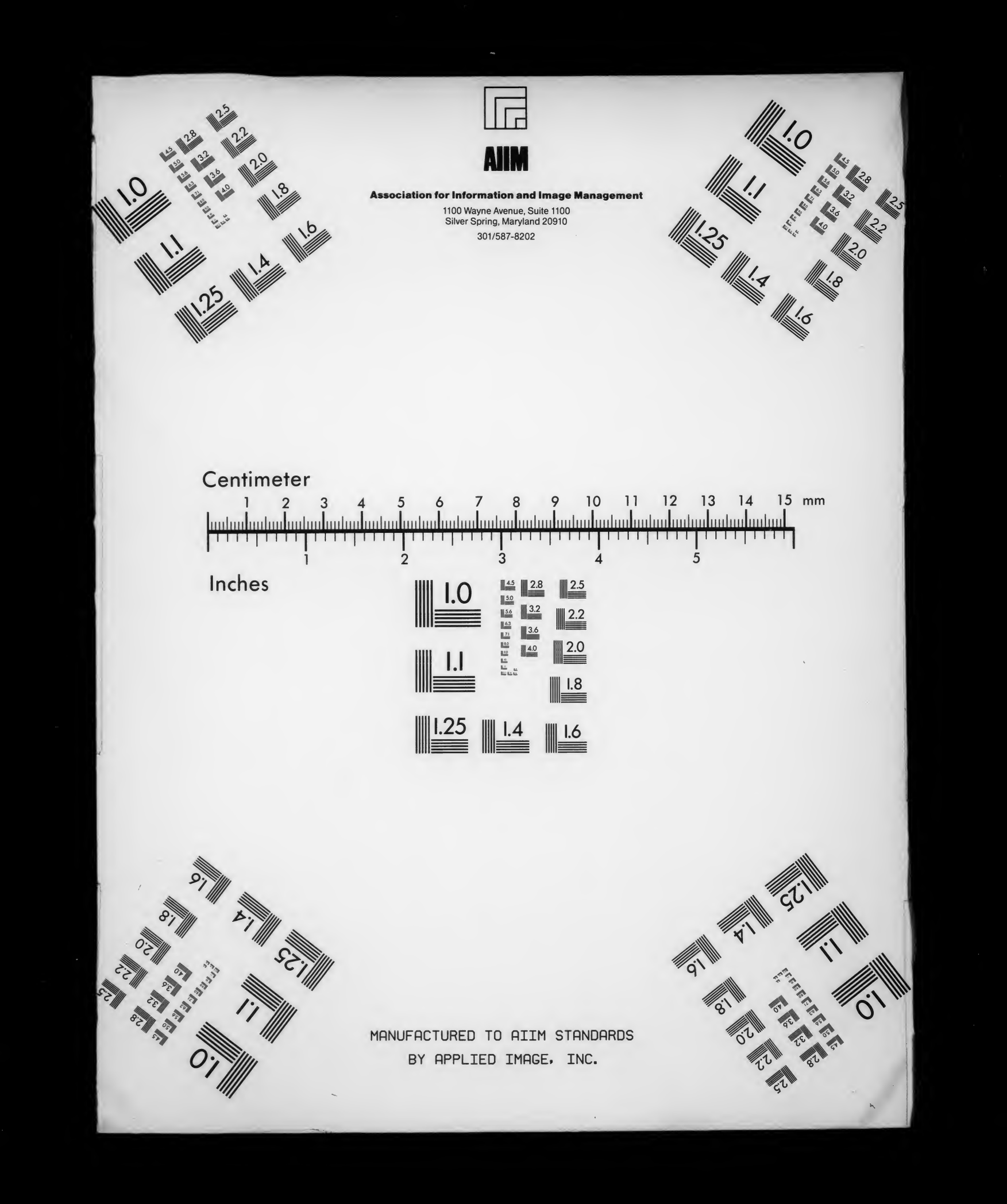
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The Mystery of Iniquity.

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

IN THE

CHURCH OF ST. MARY-THE-VIRGIN,

ON THE

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, NOV. 17, 1867,

BY

WILLIAM BASIL JONES, M.A.,
ARCHDEACON OF YORK.

Published by Request.

OXFORD and LONDON:
JAMES PARKER AND CO.
1867.

A Sermon, &c.

2 THESS. ii. 7.

The mystery of iniquity doth already work:

THE text, as I need hardly remind you, belongs to one of the very few directly predictive passages to be found in the writings of St. Paul. An expectation of the immediate return of the Lord, grounded in part upon a misinterpretation of the Apostle's teaching, and partly, as it would appear, on forged communications which purported to proceed from him, had so unsettled the minds of the Christians of Thessalonica, that some of them were induced even to forsake their daily avocations. St. Paul assures his readers that the Day of the Lord must be preceded by certain events, of which he has already forewarned them. The nature of those events can only be gathered from this obscure passage, illustrated by such other places of the New Testament as may be thought to bear upon the subject. As the Apostle is here alluding to previous teaching of which we possess no other record, his language, though doubtless intelligible to those who had formerly been instructed by him, is extremely difficult of interpretation at the present time. You will not suppose that I intend to examine in detail a passage of unfulfilled prophecy.

This would scarcely be the place for such a discussion. Neither does it seem to me that such matters, treated as we ordinarily find them treated, tend very largely to edification. Yet I think I may point out some of the leading features of St. Paul's representation of the mystery of iniquity in such a manner as may not be unpractical at the present time. Let me first recite the entire passage.

"Now we beseech you (brethren) for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him; that ye be not soon shaken out of your mind, or be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by letter as by us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is come. Let no man deceive you in any manner: for [that shall not be] except there first come the apostasy, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition, the opposer and exalter of himself above every one called God, or that is an object of worship, so as to take his seat in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that while I was yet with you, I was telling you these things? And now ye know what restraineth, in order that he may be revealed in his own season. For the mystery of lawlessness worketh already, only until he that now restraineth shall be out of the way. And then shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord Jesus shall consume with the breath of His mouth, and bring to nought with the appearance of His coming: whose coming is according to the working of Satan in every sort of mighty work, and signs and miracles of falsehood, and in every deceit of unrighteousness,

for those who are perishing, because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God sendeth them a working of error, so that they may believe the falsehood, that they may all be condemned who believed not the truth, but took pleasure in unrighteousness[a]."

I have already said that it is beyond my present scope to attempt a complete examination of this difficult passage. I will merely call your attention to a few of the more salient points.

First, let us ask what we are to understand by the word "mystery," which, be it observed, is the emphatic term in the text[b]. The careful reader of St. Paul's Epistles must be aware that it is frequently used by that Apostle, and, as a rule, in an altogether peculiar sense. This is not the modern popular use of the term, still less is it its ecclesiastical use. It simply means an unknown fact or truth, and generally something which, having for a while been hidden from the world, has been or is to be revealed to it in the fulness of time. Thus, I conceive, the word is here used. The mystery of iniquity is a latent principle of iniquity suffered by God's wisdom to work unobserved for a season, which is at length to break loose and manifest its full proportions.

And then we must consider the meaning of the word translated "iniquity." I need not tell you that

[a] 2 Thess. ii. 1—12.

[b] Notice the collocation: *Τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας, μόνον ὁ κατέχων ἄρτι ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται· καὶ τότε ἀποκαλυφθήσεται ὁ ἄνομος, κ.τ.λ.*

it would have been more exactly rendered "lawlessness," even as "that wicked," spoken of in the following verse as the incarnation of this evil principle, is really "the lawless" one. The "iniquity," then, of the text is not simply moral evil as such, but moral evil regarded as acting in defiance of every rule and of every restraining power; it is not simply sin, it is rebellion. And with this agrees that singular and most obscure representation of the hindrance to the full development of evil which existed in the Apostle's day. It is "that which restraineth," or, as it is afterwards expressed in a more personal and concrete shape, "he that restraineth." There was some power which checked the full growth of lawlessness, and prevented it from breaking forth into overt acts of rebellion against God.

One or two more points are necessary to be observed. This mystery of lawlessness, this latent principle of iniquity, which was working secretly even in the Apostle's time, was to manifest itself to the world after the withdrawal of the unknown impediment to which the Apostle refers. And it would then appear in a personal form, concentrated in one who is pre-eminently "the lawless one." We cannot doubt that this "lawless one," the "opposer," as he is here called, is to be identified both with the Antichrist of whom St. John speaks, (adding a remarkable illustration of our text in the words "even now are there many Antichrists[c],") and with that fearful picture in the Book of Daniel with which such of St. Paul's readers as were ac-

[c] 1 John ii. 18.

quainted with the Old Testament would be perfectly familiar[d]. Three things in the description of the Antichrist which is here given are especially worthy of notice. First, he is represented, like the Wilful King of Daniel, as proceeding to the utmost acts of the most audacious impiety. He invades the very sanctuary of God, and arrogates to himself Divine honours. Then he is (so to speak) a parody and a mockery of Christ. His revelation and his coming are set over against the revelation and coming of the Lord, with a minute exactness of correspondence which is perhaps not quite apparent to the English reader. And he is so far an imitator of the true Messiah, as to resort to miracles for the authentication of his mission. Indeed, the imitation is so complete, that the very terms which the Evangelists apply to the miracles of Christ are here applied to the miracles of Antichrist. Lastly, it seems evident that this fearful personage was expected by the Apostle to arrive immediately before the Second Coming of Christ, which was to be the signal for his discomfiture and destruction.

These are the chief points which any man whose mind has not been warped into controversial leanings can scarcely fail to see in this prediction. But we must recollect that the fulfilment of prophecy is shewn by experience to be but rarely in exact accordance with the mind of the prophet. The Virgin's Child and the Man of Sorrows have found a realization far beyond any possible expectation of the inspired writer by whom their appearance was originally

[d] Dan. vii. 24, 25.

announced. And therefore when we say that St. Paul's conception of Antichrist was such as has now been described, we cannot be certain in what exact particulars his anticipations are to be fulfilled. That they will be fulfilled we do not doubt; but how, we dare not say.

Neither shall I now enquire in what manner they are to be fulfilled. I only wish to call your attention to the especial characteristic of the Antichristian principle, to which the language of the text most particularly points. It tells us, as we have seen, of the secret working of the mystery, the latent principle, of lawlessness, and the rest of the passage intimates that this principle of lawlessness will receive a final and tremendous development before the consummation of all things. Whatever else may be intended by the various details of the prophecy, this is certainly clear. There is at work in the world an evil principle, of which the very signature is contempt for law and order. This is to be kept in check for a while, and then to break out into open rebellion against God and against all which represents Him upon earth. The powers of evil are, as it were, to gather to a head, and then to be destroyed at one blow; and the way has been prepared for this terrific consummation from the days of the Apostle, and even from earlier times.

Now, my brethren, it is interesting to compare this prophetic representation both with the actual phenomena of the world, and with certain theories of the progress of human society which have gained a large

acceptance in modern times. Unquestionably the principle of order, law, rule, obedience, reverence, is gradually relaxing its hold upon men's minds. Compare the existing condition of society in this country, and still more in certain other countries in which modern ideas have had a fuller and more uncontrolled development than in our own, with its condition even within the memory of living men, and the fact of which I speak, whether we welcome it with satisfaction or accept it with regret, will be equally apparent. Extend your survey over the three centuries of that which may be called distinctively modern history, and we shall see the same tendency at work on an even larger scale. You tell me that the laws are better observed than within your own memory or in the days of our fathers. No doubt the laws are administered with greater promptitude. No doubt a more important section of the population find it to be to their interest to observe and support them. But observance of the law for its own sake, and as a duty—obedience not only for wrath but also for conscience' sake—is *that* as active a principle as it was in past times? I fear that it is not; while reverence for authority, as for that which bears the stamp of the Divine sanction, is all but unknown. Such loyalty as still exists among us is a sentiment rather than a principle. Compare it with the loyalty of the Caroline period, and we shall see at a glance that it differs not only in degree but in kind. The loyalty of that age was narrow-minded, tinged with superstition, and blended with much from which we should justly

shrink, but it was at least a powerful motive to action. Mediæval society, again, was rude and restless like a troubled ocean. Yet it had a fixed basis in the system of personal dependence which was the very essence of feudalism, and the orderly principles of government, under which it is our lot to live, were evolved out of it as by a natural process. Alas, my brethren, where is that sentiment of obedience now? The anarchical spirit has shewn itself of late in various places and in novel forms, not without encouragement from those of whom we might have hoped better things. It seems as if that good old-fashioned exposition of the Fifth Commandment which the Church of England, acting on the principle of interpretation laid down in the Sermon on the Mount, puts into the mouths of her catechumens, were fairly out of date. Indeed, we are told that the Fifth Commandment itself has a weak and failing hold on the conscience of the young, perhaps in this and certainly in some foreign countries. There is one startling change which we must all have noticed. Discipline has nearly ceased to be an important element in education. In the Oxford of twenty years ago it played an important part. There were many evils in the place, of which (thank God) we see less now; but there was an active and visible discipline, and one which in the main was cheerfully obeyed, but which seems, I know not how, to have slipped through our fingers. Its partial failure is only part of a general law. The relation between instructor and pupil, ruler and subject, master and servant, parent and child, have

changed within the memory of men even of middle life. This unruly spirit has also attacked us in a quarter where we were least prepared to expect it. Priests of the English Church, sworn to canonical obedience in all things lawful, have manifested a most unedifying contempt for the authoritative admonitions of their ecclesiastical superiors. Were they Puritans? Had they Presbyterian theories of the perfect equality of Christian ministers, or Congregationalist theories of the perfect independence of Christian Churches? By no means. They called themselves (perhaps a little invidiously) Catholics, and doubtless professed great reverence for the patristic axiom, *ἄνευ ἐπισκόπου μηδέν*. My brethren, a deep and genuine respect even for adverse authority drove out of the English Church a man the very echoes of whose voice appear to those who once heard it still to linger within these walls. By the absence of respect for authority, by disobedience and self-will, the English Church is now in danger of being torn in pieces. Believe me, I am not coming forward like the poet's ideal old man, or like the Aristophanic impersonation of conservatism, merely to praise the temper and manners of past times. I simply give you the results of my own observation and of that of others who probably look with less disfavour on the changes which are taking place before our eyes. The general fact of the gradual failure of obedience and reverence is one which, however we may regard it, we cannot gainsay.

The fact being admitted, it may be viewed from two wholly opposite points of view. It may be said

that the world is growing daily more mature, and that the childish motives of reverence and obedience are gradually giving way to the more manly principle of reason. The human race, we are told, undergoes a process of education analogous to that which forms the mind and character of the individual. We learn first to obey, and then to reason and act for ourselves. Thus does the child grow into the man; thus does the constrained order of an imperfect age pass into the full-grown civilization of the modern world. An elegant and symmetrical theory this, and of about equal argumentative value with most similitudes and parallels! Mankind, we are reminded, has made a beneficial progress in other things. Our country presents a spectacle of external order and material civilization far exceeding the most sanguine anticipations of the most sagacious among our forefathers. The well-to-do labourer of the nineteenth century regards as necessaries objects which were luxuries, or were unknown, to the nobleman of the thirteenth. The change of sentiment of which we speak, is only one example of the general advancement of the human race. In this, as in other things, we have got beyond our forefathers. To act with reason and with conscious choice is a nobler thing than to obey. Obedience is a mere training, designed to lead men upwards to this result. Bold speculators are not content with drawing comparisons between the present and the past; they look forward with complacency to the future. They prophecy a social millennium, in which the material condition of humanity will have been perfected by the appliances of physical science, while its moral and spiritual state will have been brought to a like perfection by its final emancipation from the bondage in which it has been so long held by dynasties, aristocracies, and priesthoods. The phenomena of which we have lately spoken, are but the dawning of this blessed state. We need not look forward to any convulsive struggle between the evil and the good. Social, political, and mental liberty, will soon overcome and eliminate its opposites, and will be as a light shining more and more unto the perfect day. Christianity itself, as it is more than hinted, is to expire in an euthanasia of the purest and most exalted philosophy.

A comfortable doctrine truly, but one which is at present very far from being universally accepted. For others will not fail to see in the failure of order and obedience the beginning of a very different end. They will apprehend the dissolution of the existing framework of society as its necessary consequence, and will look forward with dismay into the unknown future which is beginning to unfold itself. Old powers, laws, institutions, creeds, the strong foundations on which our social order is built, seem to such persons to be threatened with imminent destruction; and the entire fabric of the modern political world seems to them about to resolve itself into a chaos out of which new and strange combinations may be expected shortly to arise. They will look forward not to a reign of order, law, and morality, but rather to that unnatural union of anarchy and despotism to

which a worn-out political system regularly gravitates, and to the destruction or obliteration of moral principles out of the hearts of the mass of men. In a word, they will be inclined to look upon the change of which we have now been speaking, as a symptom not of growth but of decay.

And it cannot be denied that they have a strong argument in their favour which has been much overlooked. A great part of that change in the mental condition of mankind on which many are disposed to look with favour as an emancipation from the thraldom of a servile superstition, has really taken the shape of an attack not merely on loyal obedience and orthodox belief, but upon both natural and revealed religion, and on the common principles of universal morality. Men are unwilling either to believe or to act upon authority, and are ready to push this principle to its logical consequences. In religion, they apply their critical tests not only to creeds and dogmas, but to the ultimate foundations on which they rest; and in matters of practice the self-same spirit which tends at one moment to resolve all Christianity into morality, at another moment saps the very foundation of morality by denying to man a spirit, a conscience, or a free-will. It makes its onslaughts not merely on the artificial relations of political society, but on the natural relations of domestic life. The sanctity of marriage, the sanctity of parental authority, and the reverence due to age, are not exempt from its destructive criticism. The horrible revelations of organized crime which served but the

other day to shew us on what combustible and explosive materials the very foundations of the social fabric rest, teach us that this modern disregard of law involves a like disregard of common morality; and the deliberate palliation of such crimes by men of education and influence, cannot fail to inspire the attentive observer with serious alarm for the future. All these things point in the same direction. A restraining influence of some kind seems to be gradually withdrawn to make way for a reign of license and self-will.

Apply to the competing explanations of this change the prophetic declarations of St. Paul, and it is not difficult to say to which of them the mind of the Christian believer ought to incline. He will accept with gratitude the large measure of external civilization in the midst of which his lot is cast. He will shrink from the obscurantism which looks upon every change as evil. He will have no sympathy with a Papal *non possumus*. He will recognise a growth, a progress, and an increasing purpose in the slow development of human culture. But he will not fail to see that, in the course of this development, destructive elements have been evolved, charged with the most perilous consequences to the social fabric; and he will recognise the mystery of iniquity, the lawless tendency which worked underground in the Apostolic age, in that abnegation of every principle of obedience which has reached an unexampled height in our own. Neither will he shrink from this conclusion, even when he observes that this sentiment of

independence is blended with much that is noble, virtuous, and beneficial, or that we owe to it in part, by God's goodness, some of the choicest blessings which we enjoy. The most dangerous elements in our nature may be transmuted by a divine alchemy into the source of much that is good, and so long as this spirit is controlled by any sense of reverence it is capable of producing positive excellence. But it appears at length to have emancipated itself from control, and to be displaying itself, not as the mystery, but as the open spirit of lawlessness. The Christian believer will see in this altered aspect of the world at least a partial fulfilment of the word of prophecy. He will not necessarily conclude that it betokens even the beginning of the end, for it is not for him "to know the times and the seasons, which the Father has put in His own power[e]." But he will regard it, if not as the actual commencement, at least as a type and a shadow of that Antichristian empire of evil which "the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming[f]." And he will be prepared to meet the time of trial which God seems about to bring upon the earth, by the full assurance which the Apostle gives us of the final victory of righteousness. He will expect a partial and temporary triumph of the powers of evil, neither will such a triumph cause his faith to fail: nay, it will confirm it, simply because it has been foretold. Once it was Athanasius against the world. The time may come when it shall

[e] Acts i. 7.

[f] 2 Thess. ii. 8.

be the Christian against the world. Why not? The symbolical language of the Apocalypse speaks of the Church as at one time to be reduced to two witnesses prophesying in sackcloth[g]. I do not pretend to say what the figure means, or even whether it belongs to the past or to the future; but it suggests the idea of a great and general apostasy, and of the continuance of the golden thread of living tradition in the persons of a very scanty remnant. This may well be. God knows. But we have the happy assurance that when things are at the worst there will be a sudden and unexpected deliverance, and that the powers of evil will be overthrown when they appear to have reached the climax of their success. And this, I think, is the great lesson of prophecy. It is given for comfort and encouragement in times of trial to the Church. We hear its key-note in these words, "Here is the patience and the faith of the saints[h]."

A very few words more. The Church which reads this lesson in the prophetic declarations of the New Testament clings with a divine instinct to all that can stay the progress of this development of evil. Without pretending exactly to determine what St. Paul intended by that restraining power of which he informed his Thessalonian converts, she sees such a restraining power in the organized constitution of political society. The State is the natural ally of the Church, and not, as fanatics of more kinds than one appear to think, her natural enemy. The Church re-

[g] Rev. xi. 3—12.

[h] Ibid., xiii. 10.

fuses to abandon the vantage-ground which her connection with the State affords her, till she is driven from it by force, because she feels that it enables her to present a firmer front to the powers of evil. For the same reason she clings to an outward and visible unity. Without denying that unity is less precious than truth, and without refusing to recognize the services of those who (she thinks unwisely) have separated themselves from her, she feels bound to enter a standing protest against what she considers a groundless schism, as a weakening of her hands in the great contest against sin and unbelief. The time will come when these and other restraining influences will have been taken out of the way. And the course of events seems to be tending towards such a result. It may not happen in our time, although it is impossible in days of rapid and general change to forecast the future. Meanwhile, it is our duty, by every means short of a sacrifice of principle, to maintain our present position.

For, my brethren, we have only to lift up our heads and look around us to be assured that a great crisis in the history of the Church and of the world is drawing near. Not in England only, but elsewhere, men's hearts are failing them for fear: not in England only, but everywhere, we see the tokens of perilous times. Only the other day the eagles of this world's power were fluttering and screaming over the carcase of ecclesiastical sovereignty, and the conflict, though postponed for a while, may be renewed at any time. If so, the ancient centre of empire and of

Christendom will be the theatre of a contest most momentous in its consequences to civilization and to Christianity. No blow will be struck there, but will make its vibrations felt in every quarter of the world. Meanwhile, throughout Europe and throughout every settlement of Europeans, we observe the same phenomena;—the political and the religious world in a stage of extreme tension; bitter antagonism between race and race, or between class and class; respect for authority everywhere giving way; belief of every sort, either dissolving into mere scepticism, or assuming the form of positive disbelief; and finally, a seeming preparation for some great conflict, of which men do not know the ground or principle, and much less foresee the issue. In all this, our duty is plain. It may be summed up in a single word, if we take it in its literal meaning and in its widest application,—it is Loyalty. "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints[i]."

[i] 1 Cor. xiv. 33.

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